DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 061 CS 213 143

AUTHOR Jenkinson, Edward
TITLE A Professor Responds by Computer to the Writing of Elementary Students. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-CS-92-02
PUB DATE 92
CONTRACT RI88062001
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills, Indiana University, 2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; *College School Cooperation; *Computer Networks; Electronic Mail; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; Writing Achievement; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; Indiana; *Writing Conferences

ABSTRACT

During the summer of 1990, a university English education professor in Indiana responded to the writing of 20 fourth through seventh graders via a computer installed in his home. The students wrote daily anything ranging from a 3-line haiku to 10-20 computer-screen stories. The classroom teacher took the students through the steps in the writing process, suggesting topics and writing modes where appropriate. All of the students' writing was sent daily by computer network to the professor, who responded to each piece. More than half of the students incorporated some, if not all, of the professor's suggestions in their revisions. After responding to 263 pieces of writing, the professor now has no doubts that students at all levels of instruction write more and write better when they can use a computer and when they have an interested audience in addition to the classroom teacher. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ERIC Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills EDO-CS-92-02

Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150

D69

Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847

ED341061

A Professor Responds by Computer to the Writing of Elementary Students

CS213143

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills EDO-CS-92-02

Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150

D69

Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847

A Professor Responds by Computer to the Writing of Elementary Students

By Edward Jenkinson

During the Summer of 1990, I responded to the writing of 20 fourth through seventh graders from a computer installed in my home in Bloomington, Indiana by the Bartholomew County (Indiana) Community School Corporation. Working daily with their classroom teacher in a summer school computer writing class that drew students from all over Columbus, Indiana, the students sent me 263 pieces of writing in 4 weeks. The experience is one that I will never forget, and one that I hope the young writers and their teacher, Vickie Osman, enjoyed.

The students wrote their drafts on Microsoft Works. Then their teacher attached their files to messages that she sent by modem to me with an electronic mail program called CCMail. Microsoft Works is essentially a user-friendly program that presented few problems to the upper elementary students as they wrote daily anything ranging from a 3-line haiku to 10 to 20 computer-screen stories. Only a few students seemed to have any difficulty composing on a computer. Occasionally, messages were scrambled or even lost because of faulty commands, but no one quit because of technical difficulties. At times, Mrs. Osman and I decided that we were experiencing more problems than the students, primarily because we were working with 20 times as many messages as each individual student. She had to make certain that all of the students' writing (sometimes as many as 40 a day) were attached to her CCMail message to me. I had to make certain that I responded daily to all messages sent by these students, who had just completed grades 3 through 6.

Of the 20 students enrolled in the class, 2 entered fourth grade the following fall; 9 entered fifth; 5 were eligible for sixth; 4 would be in seventh.

Asked on a questionnaire to report their average grade in English, 5 noted that they earned mostly A's; 7 received B's; 3 C's; 5 D's and F's.

Motivation for Enrolling

When asked why they enrolled in the course, 7 students replied that they liked to work with computers; 4 wanted to improve their writing skills; 2 signed up for a "fun class"; 6 enrolled because their mothers "made me" or "needed a baby sitter"; 1 student expressed concern about failing grades in English.

Five listed all or part of the English language arts as one of their favorite school subjects; 8 wrote that English was their least favorite subject.

Mrs. Osman took the students through the steps in the writing process. She and I suggested both topics and writing modes whenever appropriate—and especially when a student indicated a lack of something to write about.

The students, Mrs. Osman, and I introduced ourselves by computer. I talked to Mrs. Osman by telephone, but I did not meet her or the students until the next to last day of summer school, when I visited the class. I did this intentionally so that the students would be responding only to the messages that I sent by computer; they would not be responding to vocal inflection, facial expressions, mannerisms, or clothing.

Note from the Editor:

Edward Jenkinson designed and directed the Indiana University Computer Writing Project, which he conducted for three semesters, beginning in the spring of 1990. Pre-service teachers in his classes responded, by computer network, to the writing of more than 600 elementary and secondary students in 5 school corporations. That project prompted Larry Brackney, Director of Technology for the Bartholomew County (Indiana) Community School Corporation, to invite Jenkinson personally to respond to the writing of elementary students by computer network. With the aid of a grant from the Indiana Department of Public Instruction, Brackney installed a computer and modem in Jenkinson's home in the summer of 1990 so that he could work with 20 students and their teacher.

Jenkinson says that the 4-week project "reshaped my role as a teacher of writing. Once more I discovered, first hand, what kinds of responses work and what do not. I also rediscovered that it is far too easy for me to attempt to reshape students' works according to my own ideas. As a teacher-respondent, I must never take works away from student writers; rather, my task is to help writers improve their writing while retaining their own ideas, voice, and style."

Edward Jenkinson is a Professor of English Education at Indiana University.

CS213253

The students, Mrs. Osman, and I thought that the introductions helped to get the writing exchanges off to a good start; however, they did present some problems. Several of the students decided that I was a pen pal, and it took nearly 2 weeks before Mrs. Osman convinced them that I was not responding to their writing just to be friendly. Those students had apparently decided that my response to their themes, including suggestions for revision, were merely attempts on my part to keep the computer dialogue flowing.

The students wrote reports, poems, dialogues, stories, and letters. To give the students a variety of writing experiences, Mrs. Osman assigned some tasks. But the students were also free, throughout the summer-school session, to choose their own topic and modes.

Response to Drafts

My task was to respond to the drafts that each student sent to me by way of the computer network. My objectives were to help students improve their drafts and to encourage them to write more effectively. I was conducting writing conferences by computer, but such conferences are far different from face-to-face exchanges. I could not rely on a smile, a soothing voice, an outstretched hand, or any other non-verbal cue. I had only words.

Typically, I made an encouraging comment to the student which I followed with a series of questions or comments that I thought would help the writer improve the work. More than half of the students incorporated some—if not all—of my suggestions in their revisions; others chose to ignore them until Mrs. Osman told the students that they must use my questions and comments as a checklist for revision. That some students chose to ignore my comments and questions was not surprising since several researchers have noted that student writers frequently ignore both teacher and peer suggestions for revisions.

Observations about the Project

After 4 weeks and 263 responses to the young writers, I feel that I can safely record the following observations:

1. The quality of the writing was impressive. More than half of the students wrote quite well, and of those who did, not all earn A s and B's in English. Several of the students who considered English to be their worst subject responded to my comments and suggestions far better than a few of the "A" students who thought their first drafts "were perfect."
2. I frequently wrote as much, if not more, than the student writer.
3. I did not limit my questions and comments to the content only. Since publication—in the broadest sense of that term—was the goal, I commented on, or asked questions about sentence structure, spelling, and mechanics. (The students knew that I would put samples of their writing together in a publication for students, their parents, and a few teachers. They also knew that I might use some of their writings in articles I would write for journals.) Students were free to use the spell checker on the computer, and I urged them to do so. But, as Mrs. Osman noted, the spell checker did not highlight some misspellings because it could not always determine which word a student was trying to spell.
4. If serious errors effectively blocked communication, I gave the writer a short, focused lesson on a specific topic, such as run-on sentences. I was pleased with the responses to those lessons by several of the students.
5. As I read and responded to more of each student's writing, I tried to make my comments and questions fit the student. In some instances, I limited my remarks solely to a few encouraging words. In other cases, I would volunteer short lessons on specific problems. In still others, I would suggest other types of writing or topics. And, of course, I learned that not all of my comments, suggestions, and questions were well received.
6. I rediscovered what I had learned years ago: I must not impose my will on the student writer. I can suggest; I can question; I can point out strengths and weaknesses; but, ultimately, what is done with the writing is the decision of the writer.

When I started this project, I believed that students at all levels of instruction might write more and write better when they can use a computer and when they have an interested audience in addition to the classroom teacher. I now have no doubts about that hypothesis.

1991

For more information about computers and writing in elementary classrooms, see the following:

Bright, Twyla I. (1991). "Integrating Computers in the Language Arts Classroom." Paper presented at the Annual Indiana Fall Language Arts Conference, Bloomington, IN. [ED 326 884]

Coats, Kaye, *et al.* (1990). "Ideas from Teachers." *Writing Notebook: Creative Word Processing in the Classroom*, 7(4), 40-41. [EJ 408 372]

Cochran-Smith, Marilyn. (1991). "Word Processing and Writing in Elementary Classrooms: A Critical Review of Related Literature." *Review of Eduational Research*, 6(1), 107-55. [EJ 425 124]

Franklin, Sharon, Ed. (1988). *Making the Literature, Writing, Word Processing Connection: The Best of The Writing Notebook*. Second Edition. Eugene, OR: Creative Word Processing. [ED 312 644]

Montague, Marjorie. (1990). "Computers and Writing Process Instruction." *Computers in the Schools*, 7(3), 5-20. [EJ 420 378]

O'Rourke, Ann and David Philips (1989). *Responding Effectively to Pupils' Writing*. Writing Research Report No. 2. Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Council for Educational Research. [CS 213 090]

This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RI88062001. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement.